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The Sandinistas Hang Tough

Morale is high as the army responds to contra attacks

The field-kitchen conditions are terrible. The sleeping accommodations are even worse. Yet morale appears to be high among the 800 officers and enlisted men in the Santos Lopez counterinsurgency battalion, an elite Nicaraguan army unit stationed on the banks of the northern Bocay River. "I enjoy what I am doing," says Filemon Avilez Alfaro, 36, the battalion's commander. "None of us is obliged to be here. We want to be here." Similarly, despite reports of widespread draft resistance in Nicaragua, the 1,200 reservists of the less glamorous southern command who were recently summoned to the front in Juigalpa, about 150 miles from the Bocay River, appear to be in good spirits. "I know why the army needs me: to defend the peace and the revolution," says Erinaldo Lemos, 29. "It's O.K. with me."

There is good reason why morale is high: at the moment, the Sandinista army seems to have the upper hand in its four-year-old war against the U.S.-backed opposition forces known as the *contras*. "When we are attacked, we have to respond with fire," declares Defense Minister Humberto Ortega Saavedra (see box). The main insurgent group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), declared earlier this year that it had infiltrated 14,000 of its guerrillas into Nicaragua from Honduras and positioned an additional 3,000 along the border. Last week the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry charged that the border forces were poised to invade Nicaragua with the support of the Honduran army. In the south, where the FDN has opened a second front along Nicaragua's frontier with Costa Rica, there were reports of fighting last week between *contras* and Sandinista troops. The *contras*' aim: to cut the Pan-American Highway, which bisects Nicaragua, disrupt the economy and prepare the way for an urban rising against the regime in Managua.

The *contras*, however, appear to have been caught off guard by the relative speed and efficiency with which Nicaragua's Sandinista People's Army (EPS) responded to the insurgents' rainy-season offensive. On Aug. 7, about 1,500 rebels swarmed into La Trinidad, a town in the department of Estelí, about 60 miles from the Honduran border. Comandante (Colonel) Javier Carrion, 31, the commander of the northern military zone, rushed one counterinsurgency battalion, or BLI, plus local troops to the town and called in air support from three Soviet-built Mi-24 Hind helicopters, the gunships equipped with machine guns and rockets that are being used by the Soviets in Afghanistan. The *contras* retreated and have not mounted a major assault since. A se-

nior U.S. official in Washington conceded two weeks ago that the Sandinista counteroffensive had pushed 5,000 of the insurgents back across the border into Honduras.

"The EPS responded rather swiftly, in Central American terms," said a U.S. intelligence officer shortly after the La Trinidad encounter. That was not always the case. With a 60,000-man standing army, backed by as many as 160,000 reservists and militiamen, Nicaragua has a clear numerical edge over the *contras*. Indeed, the country's military buildup is unprecedented in Central America, but the military's units have frequently been unable to coordinate their activities. Of late, however, the EPS has appeared better led, better trained and better motivated than the insurgents. Perhaps that is why the Nicaraguan army felt confident enough to engage Honduran troops in battle on Sept. 13. In the worst clash between the two countries since 1979, a Nicaraguan mortar barrage killed a Honduran soldier, and Honduras damaged two Nicaraguan helicopter gunships.

The Nicaraguans also appear to have an excellent espionage network. "The intelligence that the Sandinistas gather on the *contras* is unbelievable," says a U.S. military observer. "But in the past they haven't known how to implement that information skillfully." The swift EPS reaction to the rebel invasion of La Trinidad is evidence that communications between Nicaragua's intelligence agents and its soldiers have improved lately. "I knew where the *contras* were heading," says Comandante Carrion, "and we were able to abort their operations while they were still in my military zone."

The Nicaraguans today deploy four kinds of ground forces: regular army units, border guards, militiamen and 16 counterinsurgency battalions, of which seven are fully operational. Carrion denies that the BLIs have received any special training from Cuban advisers. However, Lieut. Carlos Cuesta, 25, leader of the Mi-24 helicopter squadron, told TIME that he was instructed by Cubans. The Nicaraguan army also takes its military doctrine from the East bloc. The EPS structure, from top to bottom, is based on the Soviet army model. Most of the country's weapons come from the Soviet Union or other East bloc nations. "We're a poor country," says Roberto Calderón, 36, chief of the fifth military zone, which includes the central and southern regions. "We take arms from whoever will give them to us."

The struggle against the *contras* imposes a heavy economic burden on Nicaragua. "Practically 50% of the national budget is being consumed by the need to confront the mercenaries," admits Defense Minister Ortega. "It affects the entire country economically, socially and even spiritually." That is not likely to change any time soon. Armed with plentiful stocks of weapons and ammunition, backed by a strong following among the country's peasant population and driven by a renewed determination to challenge the EPS along the northern and southern borders, the *contras* are not going to hand the Sandinistas an easy victory.

—By Jill Smolowe.

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A Soviet-built Mi-24 Hind helicopter gunship at an air base in Managua